

Agape
6th Sunday of Easter (B)
(1Jn 4:7-10; Jn 15:9-17)

In the brief selection from St. John's first letter (1 Jn 4:7-10), the word "love" is used ten times, including the very important and profound verse, "*God is love*" (1 Jn 4:8). Again in the Gospel, at the Last Supper Jesus repeatedly speaks to the disciples about love. But when the Lord speaks of love, or any of the New Testament writers for that matter, they use a specific word that is unique to Christianity, because Christ's teaching on love is distinctive.

English is not well-served by the word "love," since it can mean so many things on so many levels: "I love ice cream and pizza; I love to travel; I love my family and friends; I love my country, my job..." Fortunately the apostles wrote and preached in a more subtle language, Greek, that has several words for different kinds of love.

One Greek word for love is "**Eros**," and this refers to physical love, particularly sexual love. The pagan Greeks worshipped Eros as a god (as did the Romans, who called him "Cupid"). But when St. John says "God is love," in no way is he referring to Eros. Eros is love on the level of the body, the desire for things that bring pleasure, comfort, and satisfaction, rooted in instinct.¹ We share this love in common with all the animals. While it serves its purpose in human nature, directing us to the proper goods of the body, it is sinful to worship Eros (i.e., to live for the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure).

The Greeks have another word for love, "**Philos**," and this is a higher more noble love. It is the properly human love that distinguishes man from the animals. Rooted in the heart and mind, it is the love that brings happiness instead of mere pleasure, and it is accompanied by feeling: emotion, passion. It is in this sense that we "love" our fellow man ("*Philadelphia*" = "brotherly love"), or that we love and pursue wisdom ("*philosophy*").

Philos elevates and perfects Eros, moderating and disciplining the insatiable desire for gratification of the flesh. To love another in a merely physical way ("erotic" love) is the sin of lust; the other must be loved in a truly personal and human way, heart-to-heart. Likewise, to eat food merely for the sake of eating (i.e., "stuffing your face") is the sin of gluttony; food must be loved in a truly human way, as facilitating human relationships (i.e., "share a meal"). Likewise, to love money for its own sake as the source of satisfaction and pleasure is the sin of avarice; money must be loved only insofar as it advances human relationships and dignity.

¹ For Freud and modern determinists, all love is ultimately Eros.

Thus even in pagan Greece, there is a sophisticated philosophical understanding of love (“Philos”) that points to what is truly noble and “human” in man, and not simply “animal.” But this is still not Christianity. Philos, like Eros, also has its limitations and dangers. Whereas Eros can override reason through compulsive and insatiable desire for pleasure (to the point of addiction); Philos too can override the true good of man through passion and emotion or psychological issues that blind and distort. Many people, once deeply and passionately “in love,” find themselves at a later stage disillusioned, disappointed, conflicted, and profoundly *unhappy*. Philos is fickle: what begins as love, can become indifference, or even flip to hate.

Jesus teaches a different kind of love, for which the apostles used the Greek word “**Agape**.” Agape is not animal love (instinct); it is not even human love (passion); it is *divine love*. It is the very love of God Himself, the love which God *is*, and which God shares within the divine nature. It is why God is a Trinity of Persons, because “God is Love,” and this particular kind of love. The Father eternally begets the Son through love as an outpouring of Himself; and the love by which Father and Son are bound is Himself the divine person of the Holy Spirit.

It is this divine love which Jesus experiences as the second person of the Holy Trinity, and which he speaks about and communicates with his disciples. Jesus tells them, “*Love one another as I have loved you*” (Jn 15:12). He wants his disciples to love with God’s own love, with the love by which he himself loves, and he really means this. He says they are no longer on the level of slaves in comparison with God, but are now His equals, “friends” (Jn 15:14-15). Just as Philos facilitates an equal heart-to-heart love between people, Agape facilitates an equal Spirit-to-spirit love between God and man. Agape perfects Eros and Philos.

Elsewhere, Jesus reiterates, “*By this men will know you for my disciples, if you have agape for one another*” (Jn 13:35). Agape is distinctive to Christians, Christians love with the very love of God!

How is this possible? How can man, who is only human, love with divine love, the love by which God Himself loves? This exceeds the power of human nature. Jesus tells us it is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Beginning with the divine anointing of Baptism, brought to full stature in Confirmation, and continually nourished in the Eucharist, God Himself comes to dwell in the human heart and spirit (and body). The Holy Spirit lives and works through the human spirit. There is a mutual indwelling between God and man analogous to the mutual indwelling of Father and Son within the Trinity (cf. Jn 14:20). A Christian does indeed love with the love of God, and Christ intends for us to love in this way always.

What does Agape look like? How is it different from Philos and Eros? Whereas Eros is located in the physical dimension of human life, and Philos is located in the mind-heart dimension, Agape is found in the spirit itself, the deepest part of the person's soul where he acts in the spiritual freedom of his will. Agape is found in the place where man holds himself, and gives himself, willingly and freely, and independently, of instinct or emotion.

Jesus shows what Agape looks like, and two qualities in particular stand out: obedience, and self-sacrifice. *“If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, as I keep my Father's commandments and abide in His love”* (Jn 15:10). Obedience is a fundamental characteristic of Agape. There is no selfishness or self-interest with Agape, as there is with Eros (which seeks pleasure) or Philos (which seeks happiness). Agape seeks only to please and glorify the Father, through humble acceptance of His will and goodness. There is an absoluteness with Agape, that does not exist with Eros or Philos. It does not matter the cost or consequences, the hardship or ease, Agape considers only the right and good thing that must be done, and embraces it freely and wholeheartedly. Agape is the love that is sinless. All sin is imperfect love—loving the wrong things, or loving in the wrong way.

The second characteristic of Agape is self-sacrifice, or self-gift: *“There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends”* (Jn 15:13). Agape is the gift or outpouring of oneself for another, to the ultimate degree. Once again, with no thought or deliberation regarding the personal cost or hardship. In fact, the more that can be renounced in terms of the world or the flesh for the sake of the beloved, the more joyful the love. Which is why Jesus paradoxically teaches they that are “Blessed” who suffer hardship and persecution (Mt 5:1-12); and why it is a distinctive expression of Christianity to take up a life vowed to poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The Cross shows the Agape of Jesus, and it is this love we are called not simply to *imitate*, but to live from within, by the Holy Spirit. To have Agape is to be one with the Father and Son, and perfectly conformed to the will of God, as Christ was. Therefore, *“if you keep my commandments and live in my love,” “whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you”* (Jn 15:16). It is impossible to ask for the wrong thing, or to ask incorrectly, with Agape.

The great commandment of Christ, then,² is not simply that we “love” one another (in the sense of Eros perfected in Philos), but very specifically that we “have Agape” for one another.

² “This is my commandment, that you love one another” (Jn 15:17).